AT One WATH GOD II Corinthians 5:11-21 March 14, 1965

Fifty years ago, men of reason, ~~intellectuals and~~ people who were accustomed to undergirding their lives with the rational processes of logic, were concerned mainly ~~obsessed~~ with one question regarding religion: "Is it true?" ~~The~~ This theory of evolution, accepted by every respectable scientist, seemed to be incompatable with the creation story in Genesis. Men of reason suddenly began to question the historical accuracy of the entire Bible - and proved to their own satisfaction that much of what is told about Israel and about Jesus, simply couldn't have happened in the way it is recorded. The going philosophy was that if it isn't true scientifically and historically, it isn't true in any way. And so people flocked away from the church and devoted their best thinking to other things.

That era in the life of the church is over. Thanks to the efforts of Biblical scholars and theologians the faith was freed from its shaky basis of historical literalism, a basis that never was very sound in the first place. Today, the question "Is it true?" is asked only by the theologically and spiritually naive: but in the place of this question has come another, even more critical; - "What difference does it make?" This is the question that thinking men ask today; and it is a question every man answers by his membership in, or tacit rejection of the church of Jesus Christ. "What difference does it really make? Does it really matter whether or not I am a Christian? Is it relevant?"

In our scripture lesson this morning, taken from Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth, we read the New Testament answer: "If any man is in Christ he is a new creation . . . that is, God was in CHrist, reconciling the world to himself." This is the bed-rock claim of Christianity: the point at which we hear the testimony of history that it does make a great deal of difference: that what happened in Palestine between the years 30 and 33 AD is of great significance for every man. "For God was in chrict, reconciling the world, to himself."

This is the basic claim of the church, and the answe r to the question, "What differenc edoes it make." Theologically, ~~it~~ the difference is expressed in the doctrine of the atonement, a doctrine that is difficult and confusing and there fore frequently either misunderstoodd or ignored. My purpose in speaking about Atonement this morning is not just to enlarge

your theological vocabulary. Rather it is to demonstrate that when we ask the question, " What difference does it make?", as we all do periodically, we must, sooner or later, come to grips with atonement as the church's answer to our questions.

Of course I have another motive for dealing with this difficult theological doctrine. It has been my brief experience that much of our religion falls into the category of meaningless gesture or sentimental tradition, because it deals only with the periphery of our lives. Religion seldom penetrates deep inside, where we form our view of the world, where our motives are crystallized, where we put together our personality and our way of doing things. But a frank discussion of atonemnt, because of its basic claims, thrusts religion into the hidden sanctuaries of our lives. And so you you could say that my secondary purpose is to persuade you to think ultimately.

Atonement means to be at one with someone or something. Atone is an active verb, and it indicates an action that alters a prior condition. To put some meat on Webster's bare bones, then, we must begin by asking "What is that prior condition that atonemtn changes," and of course, what we are talking about is sin.

We believe that man was created to live in harmony with God and with other men. The Shorter Chatechism sums it up when it asks: "What is the cheif end of man?" and answers - "The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever." Philosophically the Christian believes that man was created for a purpose, that purpose being to live in fellowship with the creator and other created beings.

Now having said that, we turn right around and affirm the obvious truth that this condition of harmony between God and man, and man and man, simply doen't exist, i n and of itself. You don't have to be a Christian to realize that there is something radically wrong with the human situation; that there is a tragic, grating disharmony about life.

The great literature of the world bears witness to man's knowledge of this wrongness. Take this theme away from Dante, Goethe, Milton, Shakespeare, and there would be nothing left. Today, there is no market for the optimistic author: the men who have caught up and expressed the feelings of our generation have been the nihilists, those obsessed

with the absurdity of life and man's continuing inhumnaity to man.

Take an overview of the world situation. Can we even begin to think that man is alright? can we see anything but the glaring evidence that humanity is cut off from something very essential - and that the continued absence of that something leads only to self destruction. Purveyors of doom and damnation have always been certain that their generation was the worst ever, but I don't mean this at all. I mean, only, the irony of man's brilliance measured by his inability to learn how to live with other men, or with himself.

Too many good people in hisotry have done unequivocably evil things for us to ignore the possibility that there is something wrong with all of us. We like to place people in categories: that is, there are good people and bad people. The story of the Nuremburg Trials is a graphic illustration of what I mean. How was it possible for good people, husbands and fathers, doctors and lawyers, judges and school teachers to accept the unmistakable evil of Nazism? It was possible because the potential for eveil as well as good resides in every man. I read the Book, "Judgement at Nuremburg" some time ago, and spent a profitable evening last week watching the movie. The movie made its point about the ambiguity of human morality quite eloquently. But what followed the movie on the late news was even more eleoquent. The movie closed the book on all those nice German people who shut their eyes, or individually committed the atrocities of Hitlerism: but after several commercials the book was violently reopened, and the year was 1965 and the place, Selma, Alabama. Billy Wilder couldn't have done it any better. It is the same story, good peole, respectable people, people who love their children and go to church and contribute to the Boy Scouts and Little League, now taking obvious delight in bashing the heads of their racially infieror neighbors. And again the question arises: "How is it possible? How can they do it?" The answer is not that Alabama had a monopoly on evil men, and more that Germany did. The answer is simply that they are men, the same humanity that occupied Germany under Hitler, and the same humanity that courses through the being of us all. It is an ambiguous humanity, sometimes good, sometimes evil. But alone, by itself, cut off from the eternal goodness of creation and terribly estrabged from other humanity.

Whatever you call it, something is wrong. Somethigg separates man from God, and man from man, and that somehhing Christianity calls sin. It rears its ugly head in a fantastic variety of ways, from racial hatred to personal snobbishness. But it is there and it is here, in the pereoanlx potentiality of you and me and every person who ever lived.

The trouble is that we no longer call it Sin. In the sophisticated 20th century we prefer to see all our difficulties in terms of simplx moralisms, or psychological maladjustment. Professor Reinhold Niebuhr, in 1939, could speak of the "Complacent conscience of maderm man" as a common malady of the 20th century, and prove that our easy morality stems from our reluctance to think about sin. In short we have been deceived into thinking that the worlds ills can be cured by American money, societies ills by better schools, and our peronal problems by a few trips to the psychiatrist's couch. Within this context then, there is no honest facing the truth that there is somethign amiss about the whole situation.- and therefore no way out of it; no awareness that we are estranged from the God who created us, and therefore no possibility of a coming together again, no possibiltiy of atonemtn.

Now, let's stop for a moment and review the main points.

First: soemthing is wrong. Man is separated from whatever it is that gives meaning and purpose to his life. Man needs to be at one with God, his fellow man, and self.

Second, that which prohibits this "At oneness" is Sin.

Third, somethingx must happen to create the conditions for a return to atone-ness."

Common sense, bolstered by our reluctance to admeit our own helplessness, tells us that we ought to be able to create these conditions ourselves. We like to believe that if we try hard enought we can cure the ills of the world and our own lives and bring aurselves back into a right relation with God. This is the story of man's religions: dances, rituals, sacrifices, moral laws, all with the express purpose of creating the conditions for reconciliation: means of bribery, if you will, to persuade God to be at one with man.

But to the common sense approach Christianity and the Bible have always said an

unequivocal NO. The main thought of the Bible is that God takes the initiative in bringing about a right relationship with man: that man's efforts, more often than not, only serve to deepen the gulf that is already there. This is the story of Israel that Tom Mikelson is telling so eloquently in the Lenten Lecutewes. God is the one who elects a people; he chooses, calls, leads, establishes, and when it is time for atenement and reconciliation - he is the one who again takes the initiative.

With this background we can begin to understand the doctrine of atonement, and to see its centrality and importance. We speak of the "atoning death of Jesus Christ": we say that Christ died to alter the condition that makes atonement impossibile - "he saves us from our sins". But what we ususally mean is that Christ paid the price for our sins: we are guilty, we have offended God. God must be avenged, someone has to be punished - and so Christ was punished for us and God is satisfied. This, of course, simply does not correspond with the Biblical doctrine of God, nor the doctrine of the Trinity. It puts us and Christ on one side, and God and his wrath on the other. It is easy to understand: it has become the source of a flodd of Gospel songs which tell of being saved by the blood of the lamb: but in this extremely mechanical context it compleitly misses the true meaning of atonement,

What we really mean is that Jesus Christ is God's provision: he is God's way of setting the stage so that atoenemtn becomes a possibility. There is nothing mechanical about it: The death of Jesus Christ is God's way of providing a bridge across the gap that separates us from him. It doesn't happen automaticallly: there is no avenging God or bribing God: There is simply the fact that in the death of Jesus Christ God has created the conditions underw which atonement can occur.

Let's illustrate this with a simple series of events from our common life. Assume that you have done something that has seriously offended your neighbor. There is gap between you that you can feel everytime you see him. You have been wrong and you know it and your guilt begins to bother you. Mustering your courage you go to,him and apologize. You want to do something to make amends, so you bring him a gift, a symbolic peace offering. But this course of action, however noble, does not guarantee that forgiveness will take place:

There is no guarnatee that the gap will be closed and you and he will be at one again. In fact, he may even resent your trying to buy back his friendship and the siuation may be worse thanbefore.

But suppose that he, the offended one, takes the iniative: supppose he approaches you first and to demonstrate his desire to be at one with you, he brings you a gift. Should this be the case, forgiveness has happened, the gap is immeidaltey closed and a new relation ship is created because he, not you, took the initiative.

This is a rather poor human analogy ~~to atonement~~ atonement, expressed in a. It is not a paying back for wrong done, but the initiative of the one who has been wronged setting the stage for your response and a new relationship. Of course, you can also ignore him, atonement is not automatic, but it becomes possible when he takes the initiative.

In his book on icarnation and atonement, D.M. Baillie said: "The crucifixion of Jesus set men thinking more than anyhting else that has even happened in the history of the human race. And the most remarkable fact in the whole history of religious thought is this: that when the early chirtains looked back and pondered on the dreadful thing that had happene it made them think of the redeeming love of God." p184

This is the ~~enormess~~ enormous claim of Christianity. That Jesus Christ on the Cross, is God, through his own suffering, taking the initative, creating the conditions for a new relationship, coming to us and making possible - atonement. In the words of Paul - God was in Christ - reconciling.

In our common life we have seen the scars of man's wrongness. In our peronsal lives we experinece a sense of estrangement and alienation from God and from each other. The message of Christianity is that we were created for more than this: _ that there is a possibility of ~~reconciliation~~ atonement, at oneness with God and man: There is the posssibiltiy of becoming a new creation : Because God has acted: he has made it possible. We have only to accept.